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ABSTRACT

In China, psychologically oriented student counseling services are just beginning to appear on college campuses and professional assistance is badly needed from all sources. In order to help these counseling centers to develop, this paper attempts to discuss what Chinese counselors can do to help students to cope with their academic and emotional difficulties at school. Specifically, the paper begins with a description of some of the most common problems among Chinese college students. It then addresses the psychological significance of these problems to students' intellectual growth and their needs for counseling assistance. This is followed by a discussion of four suggestions as to what Chinese counselors can do to develop, expand, and improve their services to students. A tribute is paid to Chinese counselors for their enthusiasm, energy, and efforts in helping to develop more fully their intellectual and emotional potentials. It is noted that their work may not be fully appreciated by society now, but they certainly have a bright future ahead of them. The paper concludes with a plea for more social and governmental support for the development of student counseling services in China. (ABL)

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A Discussion of the Use of Student Counseling Services in Chinese Higher Education

A Paper Presented at the Annual Conference of American Association of Counseling and Development in Cincinnati, March 17-19 1990

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I. Introduction

Education in any society should try to help students with their intellectual aadvancement well as their emotional growth. Moreover, "academic difficulties are sensitive indicators of students' general psychological well-being, and can not be abstracted from the context of their level of development, adaptive style, psychodynamic conflicts, social functioning, family expectations, and situational demands (Ducey, 1989). Therefore, educational institutions at any level should be prepared to confront students' academic underachievement with psychological understandings and therapeutic assistance. Such is reflected in many educational systems in the world, North America in particular, that well established student counseling services are provided in most of their educational institutions. These counseling services are usually oriented in principles of clinical, developmental, and educational psychology and play an important role in the intellectual and social well-being of their students. In China, however, such psychologically oriented student counseling services are just beginning to appear on college campuses and they badly need professional assistance from all sources. In order to help these counseling centers develop, this paper attempts to discuss what Chinese counselors can do to help students cope with their academic and emotional difficulties at school. Specifically, the paper starts with a description of some of the most common problems among Chinese college students. It then addresses the psychological significance of these problems to students' intellectual growth and their needs for counseling

assistance. This is followed by a discussion of four suggestions as to what Chinese counselors can do to develop, expand, and improve their services to students. The paper concludes with a plea for more social and governmental support to development of student counseling services in China.

II. A Discussion of Some Common Problems among Chinese College Students

A. The Problem of Si Bao

Literally, Si Bao means to take care of four needs of daily functioning which includes: clothing, food, accomodation, and travel. Symbolically, it means to take care of everything for a person to so that he can concentrate what is important for him to do. For Chinese college students, Si Bao means to be totally dependent on their parents in physical and psychological terms. Specifically, as most Chinese students have to enter a college through intense competitions, they are usually exacused from various household chores at home so as to let them devote all their time and energy to their studies. Alternatively speaking, they are offered the privilege of Si Bao for as long as it takes them to enter a college. However, a resultant effect of Si Bao is that many students have become overly dependent on their parents for their daily functioning. So an independent college life, especially to those who come from distant areas, poses an enormous amount of distress and challenges to these students. Not only do they have to learn to wash their own clothes, manage their own finance, and study for their own goals, they also have to learn to make judgements and decisions, big or small, academic

or otherwise, on their own. The transition is not easy for many students and can sometimes bring about serious traumas to their current social and intellectual functioning as well.

B. The Problem of Fall grom Grace

Because there has been a severe lack of universities in China, students have to pass many highly competitive examinations, including the nationwide college entrance examination*, to be able to go to a college. Very often, students who come from rural and remote areas are the best among the best in their regions and neighborhoods. One big problem for this group of students is that they have to adjust to the fact that they are no longer the best in a class or a school. Instead, they may even become the bottom students in a class and may never reclaim their glory throughout their four years of study at college. Such a fall from grace can be very dramatic and painful to accept for these students. It often provokes great anxiety and distress in them as well. In some cases, the experience may lead to maladaptive behaviors in students and make them vulnerable to such mental disorders as depression, dysthymia, bipolar disorder, and even schizophrenia. In fact, it has been reported that college suicides and mental illness are frequently a function of maladjustment such as this to college life (Daxue, 1988).

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* The nationwide college entrance examination is fatal to college admission in China. It is scheduled in early July each year and takes three days to complete. A total of six subject examinations are given and they vary by candidates' choice of studies. Approximately 20 - 25% of the candidates are reportedly able to pass the examination and be admitted to appropriate universities on the basis of their scores.

C. The Problem of Loneliness

Loneliness is another prominant problem among Chinese college students, especially to whose who come from distant areas. It usually takes the form of homesickness, by wn h a student may become very homesick of his family, his friends, and his former teachers and schoolmates, etc.. For instance, according to a survey that was conducted a couple of years ago at Beijing University (Daxue, 1988), of all the first semester freshmen students, 58.4% of them reported missing their hometown extremely, 74.3% of them reported missing their former teachers and schoolmates frequently, and 67.1% of them reported missing their days of middle school very much. Sometimes, the feeling of loneliness can reach a pathological level to which a student may be so preoccupied with homesickness that he can no longer function well academically at work.

Another common form of loneliness is overstudy. Specifically, students would attempt to spend all of their time studying just to get rid of the feeling of loneliness. The feeling is often intensified by students' lack of friendship and extracurricular activities at school. Actually, many students characterize their daily activities as following a fixed route: dorm - dining-room - classroom - library (Daxue, 1988). Given such a cycle of living, it is no surprise that students would feel extremely bored and isolated with their lives at college. It seems as if they are totally locked up in their self worlds.

D. The Problem of Over-Relaxation

As it is very difficult and competitive to enter a college in China, particularly to a college of choice, many freshmen students would indulge in total relaxation after they first enter the college to compensate for what they have lost and endured while preparing for the college examinations. Typically, students would put aside their schoolwork for a while, reading books of their interest and being actively involved in various campus clubs and social functions. Sometimes, they would also relax by doing Kan Da Shan (meaning talk with friends for unlimited time and about nonspecified topics). However, some students may over-relax at the cost of their academic performance and end up being degraded or even being expelled from the college they study at. As a matter of fact, over-relaxation is reportedly a major contributing factor to college dropout in China higher education (Daxue, 1988).

III. The Importance of Counseling to Students' intellectual and Emotional Growth

In the proceeding paragraphs, some of the common problems that Chinese college students often experience are described. Of course, these problems are far from being exhaustive for Chinese students but they are indicative of the kind of psychological problems that Chinese students confront when they enter a college. Moreover, these problems are usually embedded in various conflicts in a student's inner world, such as conflict between autonomy and dependence, conflict between between self-pride of previous educational successes and present fall from grace, conflict between maturational needs and addiction to past days of

glory, conflict between self-control and personal freedom, conflict between a yearning for relaxation and responsibilities for learning, etc.. Taken together, these conflicts represent a psychological need in a student to reorganize his sense of self as well as his pattern of interpersonal behaviors. In addition, successful resolution to these conflicts calls for use of counseling and therapeutic assistance to students.

Unfortunately, up until recently, psychologically-oriented student counseling services have been extremely underdeveloped in China and students' emotional problems are generally ignored or unadressed by school administraters. As a result, students have to deal with their internal conflicts and external pressure on their own. Worse still, they normally don not seek care until they become suicidal or mentally very sick.

Under such circumstances, it is very important that professional student counseling services be developed in Chinese higher education to respond to students' needs for psychological and academic counseling. In general, these counseling services should recognize students' internal conflicts and maturational needs with respect and clinical sensitivity. They should take students' academic dilemmas in the contexts of their current psychological and intellectual functioning. They also should seek to help students to develop more fully their intellectual and emotional potentials during the time they study at a college. In short, they should facilitate students' attempts to reorganize their self worlds so that they can adjust to challenges of a college life with competance and confidence.

To help Chinese counselors achieve such a goal, I would like

to discuss, in the reminder of the paper, a set of four specific suggestions as to how student counseling services may be developed in China.

1. To educate students to the importance of psychological well-being in their intellectual development

In general, Chinese students are much less used to resolving their academic or personal difficulties via psychological means. This is partly due to a traditional lack of psychological services in China and partly due to a cultural bias against discussing one's private matters with strangers. Seen in this light, it is advisable that Chinese college counselors start extensive educational programs to increase students' general awareness of the role of psychological well-being in their intellectual growth. For instance, students should understand that college education poses many unprecedented challenges in their lives and to successfully resolve these challenges, they need to develop better skills of self-control, self-autonomy and self/other relationship. Students lacking these skills often find it difficult to adjust to college life, which could provoke great anxiety in them and make them vulnerable to different mental disorders such as depression, dysthymia, and even schizophrenia.

Additionally, students should also be aware that a lot of times, their academic underachievement are related to their insufficient study skills which are based on cognitively less developed modalities of learning. Failure to see the point would undermine students' development for intellectual independence.

Finally, students need to understand that to use student

counseling services is to gain a better understanding of self in the context of his present social and intellectual functioning. So the process of counseling is often a process of cognitive and emotional maturity for a student as well.

2. **To establish a genuine and effective connection between a counselor and a student**

Establishment of a genuine counselor/counselee relationship is a prerequisite to success of any counseling/psychotherapy. To Chinese students, such an empathetic connection is not easily installed. There are both cultural and social reasons to it. Culturally speaking, the Chinese teacher-student relationship has been traditionally characterized by authoritarianism, which makes it difficult for a counselor to communicate with a student on an equal basis. For example, a counselor may find it uncomfortable to let the student talk most of the time and respond to it with silence and patience. He may also find it uneasy to be non-judgemental and not to offer advice while talking with a student. By the same token, it could be equally difficult for a student to assume an active role in the conversation and be encouraged to solve his dilemmas on his own.

Socially speaking, Chinese education incorporates a political couseling system. But the people who do political counseling and teaching have been so stereotypied that they are usually of people who show little respect to intellectual integrity and individuality of students. Instead, they often expect students to follow their instructions with no open doubts or challenges. Consequently, there has been a communicational gap

between these people and students.

Given these conditions, it is important that Chinese educational counselors talk with students with respect and sensitivity. Specifically, they should be respectful of whatever students have to say about their problems and understand them in the context of their present social and intellectual functioning. They should also try to be non-judgemental in their attitudes to students' problems and be prepared to play the role of a facilitator rather than that of a advice-giver. Besides, they should value highly students' self-judgements and be strictly concerned with confidentiality of their counseling records. Finally, they should explain to a student, at the first counseling session, the meaning of empathetic listening in the process of counselor-counselee communication. In brief, it is only by respecting the integrity and individuality of a student that a genuine relationship may be effectively established between a counselor and a student.

At last, it needs to be emphasized that empathetic as they try to be, Chinese counselors don't have to be unconditionally agreeable to whatever students have to say. They should try to strike a balance between that they want to say and what they have to say. The important thing is that they should be respectful of but not necessarily agreeable to students.

3. To set up various campus-issue focused sessions and workshops

Chinese counselors should try to organize various group sessions and workshops that address on various academic and interpersonal probelms that students often encounter at school.

For example, workshops may be organized to help student learn to take lecture notes, read with speed and comprehension, and write standardized academic papers, etc.. Seminars and group sessions may be organized to help students reduce their homesickness, relieve their loneliness, and learn to walk out their "locked self worlds", etc.. Peer tutoring should also be arranged for students who can not cope with their study difficulties independently. Taken together, these activities should help students become more independent both intellectually and psychologically. Further, they should also help students to be more self-concious of their goals in life and their potentials and limits in them.

Fianlly, it needs to be pointed out that, in implementing these activities, there may be a strong cultural stigma of academic underachievement in students. It is suggested that the stigma be handled with empathy and sensitivity and that students be shown, through careful explanations and illustrations, the role of peer support in overcoming those academic difficulties that are shared by students.

4. To start short, intensive training programs for preparation of better qualified counselors

For Chinese counselors, it is important that they get some professional training before they start to work. Therefore, it is suggested that short and intensive training programs of counseling/psychotherapy be set up in whichever universities that are able to to do it. In addition, supervision should also be arranged for these people after they graduate. Hopefully, this may be coordinated with the assistance from medical professionals

as well.

On the other hand, it is equally advicable that brief training courses for peer counseling be organized as well. These couses should train those students who are interested in becoming peer counselors so that they can help new students in overcoming their emotional and academic problems at college.

Finally, it is strongly recommended that such training programs accommodate not only lay counselors, but also school administrators as well. It is important for them to understand that students' academic difficulties often represent diverse motives, conflicts, and deficits in their inner world, such as social or psychological unadjustment to a new environment, resentment to demanding external or internal pressures, depression over losses or failures, affective conflicts in interpersonal relationships, inefficient study skills, handicapped cognitive development, loss of self-esteem and self-identity. Therefore, they should also see that solution to students' academic difficulties often involves more than tutoring or additional schoolwork, but a good knowledge of their present social and intellectual functioning and of their preoccupation with some significant past experiences.

I want to conclude this paper by paying a special tribute to Chinese counselors for their enthusiasm, energy, and efforts in helping Chinese students develop more fully their intellectual and emotional potentials. Their work may not be fully appreciated by society now, but they certainly have a bright future ahead of them. On the other hand, I would also like to take this occasion

to plea to Chinese government for more social and financial support to the work of student counseling services. It will prove itself to be a very strategic and beneficial investment for Chinese educational reforms and mental well-being of Chinese students.

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